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INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 001739

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR/WE, EUR/RPM AND SCA/A

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [EAID](#) [AF](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: URGING BELGIUM TO STEP UP EFFORTS IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. STATE 120807

[B](#). STATE 122234

[C](#). STATE 123222

[D](#). BRUSSELS 1622

[E](#). BRUSSELS 1629

[F](#). BRUSSELS 1666

[G](#). BRUSSELS 1703

[H](#). BRUSSELS 1737

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). Summary: (C) Embassy Brussels has been conducting an intense campaign to encourage Belgium to step up its efforts to extend and increase its military commitment to Afghanistan, and to increase the level of its civilian assistance, including police trainers. This has been carried out through personal contacts with high-ranking Belgian officials and through public diplomacy that capitalizes on the Ambassador's increasingly favorable profile in the Belgian media and with the public. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) The Ambassador has met frequently with Minister of Defense Pieter De Crem, former foreign minister and current prime minister Yves Leterme, and with former Prime Minister and now President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy. At each meeting, the Ambassador has emphasized that Afghanistan offers an opportunity for Belgium to take a leadership role in Europe. Prior to the President's December 1 speech, the Ambassador urged De Crem and Leterme to speak up in support of a more robust presence in Afghanistan even before the President laid out his strategy and before other countries, such as the UK, took the lead (ref D). Such a speech would help to hold other NATO members, such as the Netherlands, to the tasks at hand in Afghanistan. Then-PM Van Rompuy was considering possible scenarios for a speech, but has left office to take up his EU responsibilities. Defense Minister De Crem was considering the idea actively before Gordon Brown gave his speech, saying essentially the same things. De Crem said that he still agreed with the concept of expressing strong and public support for the President's strategy.

[3](#). (C) Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke met on December 2 with FM Vanackere. He explained the implications of the new Afghanistan strategy and the importance of a long-term commitment to stability there. He also emphasized the need for development assistance, especially for Afghanistan's agricultural sector. Ref E.

[4](#). (C) Recognizing that few Belgians would have a chance to see the President's December 1 Afghanistan speech live, the Ambassador invited print and television journalists to his residence to view the speech as it was delivered at 2:00 a.m. Brussels time. Six journalists and a photographer attended despite the lateness of the hour. Belgian news outlets covered the speech in early editions. Commentary followed

soon after. Most was supportive of the speech and the strategy, although some commentators searched for a reason to criticize it. Another good result of the nighttime viewing of the speech was a four-page spread in the major Dutch-language daily De Standaard, in which the Ambassador was able to re-emphasize the President's themes.

15. (C) Following the speech, the Ambassador visited with both De Crem and Vanackere, emphasizing the importance of Belgian troops remaining in Afghanistan through 2010 and preferably longer, as needed. He also pushed for Belgium to send police trainers to Afghanistan and increase its civilian development aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan. De Crem indicated that francophone socialist politicians in the government, including Andre Flahaut, were resisting new action by the Belgian government on the basis that the United States and NATO had not formally requested more troops. The Secretary's December 3-4 visit to Brussels was an opportunity to clarify what is needed. The Belgian government confirmed on December 4 its intention to deploy a second Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team, bringing the Belgian presence in Afghanistan up to 600 troops, from about 250 in 2008. It also promised to send two or three police and one magistrate to EUPOL Afghanistan, to appoint a special representative for Afghanistan-Pakistan and to increase development assistance, if the Afghan government provides guarantees of improved governance and a vigorous fight against corruption. In her meeting with FM Vanackere, the Secretary asked Vanackere to provide 150 more troops, and to extend the troops' presence through 2011, and to provide more police trainers.

16. (C) The Ambassador set up a series of meetings for Defense

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Minister De Crem in Washington on December 15-16, including Secretary of Defense Gates, National Security Advisor Jones, Senator Carl Levin, Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee and Rep. Ike Skelton, Chair of the House Armed Services Committee. U.S. and NATO expectations for Belgium were discussed during those meetings, focusing mainly on extending Belgian participation through 2011 without stressing the need for additional troops as mentioned by the Secretary in Brussels. Ref F.

17. (C) Subsequently, the Ambassador met with Flemish Socialist Dirk Van Der Maelen and francophone socialist Andre Flahaut, who are most often identified as opposing Belgium's involvement in Afghanistan. He also hosted two separate luncheons for the Foreign Affairs Committees of the Belgian Senate and House of Representatives. The Ambassador repeatedly stressed the strategic importance of the Afghanistan effort and also the implications of lowered expectations for Belgium on its international reputation and prestige in Europe. Ref G.

18. (C) On December 16, the Ambassador met with Minister of Interior Annemie Turtelboom and strongly urged her to support sending more police trainers than the two or three already promised. The Ambassador and Turtelboom also explored ways to influence public opinion and counter opposition that may exist to building up Belgium's role in Afghanistan. Ref H.

19. (C) In the new year, the Ambassador and the Embassy intend to continue to press Belgian leaders and opinion makers to increase the Belgian presence in Afghanistan, both militarily and in terms of assistance for development and good governance. The President's Nobel Prize speech in Oslo on December 10 resonates well in Belgium, displaying how we share the same values as Belgium in terms of support for peace, but also how Afghanistan fits into that set of beliefs. The Embassy now has two sponsors in the Belgian House of Representatives to show it directly to Belgian lawmakers in the near future. We are also exploring ways to show the speech to the general public in the Park of Brussels, a central and open venue for such an event.

¶10. (C) Comment: In the political landscape of Belgium, the USG has a supportive presence for the President's Afghanistan strategy in the person of Defense Minister De Crem. We view the new foreign minister, Steven Vanackere, as still finding his footing in the MFA and reticent about new contributions. Minister of Interior Turtelboom personally favors an increased role for Belgian police advisors, but is worried about perceived adverse public opinion and is sensitive to criticism by opposition politicians such as Van Der Maelen. However, based on his conversation with the Ambassador, even Van Der Maelen understands that economic and social development in Afghanistan is key to its stability and that a greater effort is needed to provide the security that will permit that development to occur. The Ambassador and Embassy Brussels will continue and expand our efforts to build official and public understanding of the importance of Afghanistan to security in its region, in Europe and in the United States, as well as to seek an increase in Belgium's contributions. There is likely more room for expansion of its role in development and police training efforts than in new military contributions in 2010.

GUTMAN

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